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AUTHOR	Yamasaki, Erika
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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews the role of community colleges in delivering remedial education. With demand for remediation increasing, community colleges are under pressure to provide, with very limited financial resources, the bulk of developmental courses for students. In finding effective solutions to this dilemma, policy makers should consider a broad base of information, including student demographics, characteristics of successful programs, and program assessments. This information, coupled with data on student age and ethnicity, extent of necessary remediation, and English as a Second Language needs can guide policy makers in allocating funds where they are most needed. Proactive strategies community colleges can take to help developmental students include foregoing the lenient, open-door policy for a more structured one that enforces prerequisites and mandatory courses. Collaborative partnerships between community colleges and their feeder high schools have also proven effective in reducing costs and lessening the need for postsecondary remediation costs. (YKH)

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Erika Yamasaki

ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges

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University of California at Los Angeles
3051 Moore Hall
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1521
(310) 825-3931

Digest

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Effective Policies for Remedial Education

by Erika Yamasaki

Current discussions about postsecondary remedial education reflect differences in the opinions of legislators, educators, and the public as to the purpose and effectiveness of higher education. Concerned parties are asking, how many students need remedial education? Who are they? How much does it cost? Does it achieve its purpose? While these questions require attention, the more pressing issue is that of responsibility. Should the burden of remediation fall on community colleges or four-year institutions? Or should the nation's high schools be held responsible for adequately preparing their graduates?

In summarizing the volume of *New Directions for Community Colleges* edited by Jan M. Ignash (1997), this Digest reviews the role of research in addressing these policy decisions on remedial education. Effective solutions implemented by community colleges across the nation also are highlighted.

Informed Policy

The data cited by Ignash (1997) indicate a high demand for remedial education. A fall 1995 survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that 29 percent of first-time freshmen enrolled in public institutions of higher education took remedial courses in reading, writing, or math. At community colleges, which provide the bulk of postsecondary remediation, the figure was 41 percent. Despite such evident need, the response of some states has been to ban or restrict remedial course offerings. In 1994, the Trustees of the California State University (CSU) system proposed to shift 90 percent of its remedial education to the community colleges by the year 2007. Strong opposition from community colleges and other groups in California has forced CSU officials to postpone this plan. Meanwhile, Florida legislators have been successful in prohibiting public universities from offering remedial courses.

Much of the opposition to remedial education is due to its costs. Often, however, the cost of remedial education seems astronomical because figures are provided outside the context of all instructional costs. For example, in Illinois, the total dollar amount devoted to remedial education provided in community colleges was $23.4 million, yet this was only 6.5 percent of all direct faculty salary costs (Ignash, 1997).

While cost invariably bears on state and institutional policy, effective solutions consider a broader base of information including student demographics, characteristics of successful programs, and program evaluations. Data on students' age, race/ethnicity, extent of necessary remediation, and English as a Second Language (ESL) needs can assist policy makers in allocating their scarce dollars where they are needed most (Ignash, 1997).

According to McMillan, Parke, and Lanning (1997), a number of studies document a high level of correlation between student success and the following program characteristics:

- required entry-level testing,
- mandatory placement in basic skills courses,
- continuous evaluation,
- interface between remedial and college-level courses, and
- using technology to offer remediation through alternative instructional media.

A well-designed assessment of programs also can inform the process of allocating public funds and increase accountability. Weissman, Bulakowski, and Jumisko (1997) recommend measuring four aspects of program effectiveness:

- course completion success rate, which is the percentage of students earning grades of C or better,
- movement of students from remedial to college-level courses,
- successful completion of college-level coursework, and
- student persistence over a three-year period.

Specific policy areas suggested for review include mandatory student placement into remedial courses, enrollment in remedial courses upon initial entry to the college, and concurrent enrollment in remedial and college-level courses.

Proactive Remediation

Both research and current practice support the use of structured assessment and placement of students in remedial courses. Based on the philosophy of *structured open access*, the "systematic use of academic standards linked with additional approaches to assist students to reach their educational objectives," this type of proactive institutional strategy has been more successful than an open-door, laissez-faire approach that allows students to enroll in any course regardless of prerequisites (Fonte, 1997, p. 45). Rather than limiting student achievement, such intervention builds connections among students, counselors, and faculty.

South Suburban College in Illinois adopted a structured model in the early 1990s that demonstrates that intrusive procedures need not be punitive and can actually foster a caring environment for students with remedial needs (Fonte, 1997). Samples of the 14 policies of the model include:

- Mandatory placement testing for full-time and part-time students who have taken six credit hours.
- Developmental (remedial) courses are mandatory beginning with the

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student's first semester. Students on academic warning or probation status are required to develop an action plan to improve their academic standing.

The San Diego Community College District recently instituted mandatory enforcement of all course prerequisites, including recommended levels of English and math skills (Berger, 1997). Previously, the district did not insist on the use of prerequisites and students often enrolled in courses inappropriate for their ability levels. Although this system has not been in place long enough to evaluate results, some positive outcomes are evident. Berger (1997) notes increases in instructional research conducted by faculty as well as interaction among colleagues across the district. Increases in student success rates, however, remain to be seen.

Collaborative partnerships between community colleges and their feeder high schools are effective means of reducing the need for postsecondary remedial education (Richey, Mathern, O'Shea, & Pierce, 1997). By developing a secondary school writing curriculum and an assessment system that relies heavily upon portfolios that follow students throughout high school and to the community college, faculty from the two educational segments can make significant strides in promoting student success. Such a model also addresses growing public concerns that remedial courses in higher education are simply repeating what students should have learned in high school.

The Case of ESL

While the demand for remedial education in general is on the rise, ESL programs have experienced a tremendous influx of students as a result of the recent immigration wave (Kurzet, 1997). When challenged by the perennial dilemma of quality versus quantity, the ESL department at Portland Community College in Oregon decided it could provide both. Its successful action plan focused on meeting faculty development needs and overcoming three major impediments facing many ESL programs in community colleges: 1) lack of understanding of who ESL students are and what they need, 2) outdated assumptions about ESL instruction and student services, and 3) scarce public funding (Kurzet, 1997). Clarifying the needs of ESL students as well as the purpose and structure of the program has far reaching implications for students' financial aid status as well (Goldstein, 1997). Aid policies constructed to protect the integrity of public funds do place limits on the uses of these dollars for remediation. College officials can craft effective programs that allow ESL students and those in remedial/developmental programs to legally benefit from financial aid, but they must be aware of the restrictions that apply (Goldstein, 1997).

Conclusion

The upcoming reauthorization of the Higher Education Act will heighten the existing debate over postsecondary remedial education. Cost undoubtedly figures into all public policy, and this issue will not be an exception. However, the bottom line should not be the sole criterion for educational reform. Conducting research on remedial education, especially in the form of evaluating currently successful programs, can help facilitate the development of successful policy. By taking this approach, the core issues of responsibility and accountability can be addressed.

References

This Digest is drawn from *New Directions for Community Colleges*, Number 100, edited by Jan M. Ignash, published in Winter 1997: "Implementing Effective Policies for Remedial and Developmental Education."

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"Financial Aid and the Developmental Student," by Michael B. Goldstein.

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"Quality Versus Quantity in the Delivery of Developmental Programs for ESL Students," by Reuel Kurzet.

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